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Alaska Vulnerable to Soviet Infiltration

The ugly reality of more than 30,000 highly trained Soviet men and women specializing in assassination, sabotage and other deadly mischief—the Spetsnaz forces—has not been lost on the Pentagon's counterterrorist experts. They've been quietly preparing U.S. defenses against the Soviet special forces.

No place is more vulnerable to Spetsnaz infiltration than Alaska. The vast area of the thinly populated 49th state—one-sixth of the total U.S. land mass—stretches to within three miles of the Soviet Union in the Bering Strait. Indeed, there are some in the Pentagon who maintain that Spetsnaz forces are training against targets in Alaska.

These suspicions, plus unconfirmed reports of unusual Soviet equipment in the Soviet Far East and possible Russian infiltration of Alaska, prompted Dale Van Atta to visit the area and investigate the threat posed by special forces commandos.

Last summer the Air Force took part in a coordinated exercise in Great Britain, Operation Brave Defender, aimed at a potential Spetsnaz strike. Even more to the point, the largest military exercise—open or secret—against the Soviet threat was staged in Alaska last year.

Operation Brim Frost involved 18,100 Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine and Coast Guard personnel, 285 aircraft and 1,150 vehicles.

The difficulty of defending Alaska against infiltrators is staggering. There are 72 square miles of Alaska for each U.S. soldier based there. Yet it may be, as the late Gen. Billy Mitchell once said, "the most strategic place in the world"—an

area vital to U.S. security in the age of high-speed aircraft and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Operation Brim Frost was in part "designed to meet the threat of sabotage operations against critical facilities by unconventional warfare forces," according to a briefing on the war game. In southern Alaska, "enemy" forces attacked the Beluga Power Station, which supplies electricity for much of the Anchorage bowl, where two-third of Alaskans live.

In central Alaska, Army Special Forces posing as Spetsnaz attacked the Trans-Alaska pipeline, which supplies oil to the "Lower 48."

While the security Van Atta inspected at the pipeline's source in Prudhoe Bay was impressive, oil officials acknowledged that it is impossible to defend the entire 799-mile length of the pipeline as it goes south. About 420 miles of pipeline are above ground: 4 feet in diameter but only an inch thick, easily vulnerable to even a rifle bullet.

Other tempting targets are the radar stations that provide the crucial early warning of missiles headed toward the Lower 48.

For example, Van Atta walked within a few feet of the "vitals" of an early warning station six miles east of the northernmost U.S. community, the Eskimo village of Barrow. He was not viewed with suspicion.

Pentagon and Alaskan officials admit there have been reports of suspicious activities by unidentified Caucasians along the state's western coast north of Nome and on St. Lawrence Island. This is the area closest to Siberia, and the intruders could have been Soviet Spetsnaz infiltrators.